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Group: 1 (Forms 1-2)
Topic: The Meaning of Freedom

THE MEANING OF FREEDOM

My grandfather was born before the Japanese occupation in Malaya during the years 1941 to 1945. He grew up eating cassava, more commonly known as '*ubi kayu*,' because rice was a luxury. All the rations were given to the Japanese army so food was limited. When he was in school, it was compulsory to sing the Japanese national anthem, and he learned to speak their language as much as he learned to speak his own mother tongue.

When I was younger, I would ask him what it was like living under the rule of foreigners. Although I wasn't educated enough to ask him the question in those exact words; after all, I was only a child.

"*Tok*, what was it like living with the Japanese people?" I would ask.

We were sitting out on the porch and eating custard out of these little glass bowls my grandmother only used for special occasions. It made me preen whenever my grandmother treated me especially kindly.

My short legs swung as I quite sloppily scooped more sweet custard into my mouth. Some of the syrup dripped onto my chin, and my grandfather wiped it away with a napkin, exhaling a short sigh of amusement.

"Why would a small girl like you want to know about the life of an old man?" he asked teasingly, using the term of endearment, '*budak kecil*.' That was slang in *Bahasa Malaysia* meaning 'small child'.

"Don't make fun of me, *Tok Min*," I huffed at him, jutting out my lower lip. He laughed and I hid a giggle behind my small hands. Whenever my grandfather laughed, it was always a sight for sore eyes. He sounded as if he was coughing and gasping for air, but his eyes would always be bright. Right then, his eyes were as dazzling as the stars in the sky over the rim of his glasses.

"Well," he started to say, "I grew up learning Japanese, and the choices of food were limited. Rice was a real treat, but I got to eat it more often than other people."

I scrunched up my forehead in confusion.

"Why?" I asked, oblivious to the fact that my grandfather was a wealthy man.

"My parents had more money than regular people," he explained, "So I got to eat a lot more."

My grandfather was raised under an iron fist. His father was a no-nonsense type of man, and he molded my grandfather into a carbon copy of himself. Despite the lack of love he got from his own father, Amin Sarji lived a privileged life. When he was just a child, my grandfather told me that he used to play with gold coins on the floor of his living room.

Being a part of a rich community, he met my grandmother and properly courted her. She was everything he wasn't. Zainab was talkative and outspoken. He found her absolutely lovely. In return, she found his cold and awkward exterior charming. It was meant to be. Their wedding was a grand occasion and only after two years, they were blessed with a baby girl, my aunt. My father was born five years later, growing up into a loud rambunctious child, contrasting deeply with my aunt who was all soft edges.

Whenever my father talked about his childhood, he would shiver.

"Your great-grandmother used to chase me around the house with a feather duster if I was so much as a minute late from school!"

My grandfather was a young man when Malaysia gained its independence. He wasn't there at the stadium when Tunku Abdul Rahman made a whole nation burst into tears with his declarations of freedom. He was only at home, but he could still clearly feel the buzz of happiness from the people out on the street. Everything was crystal clear. Malaysia was free from the rule of the British in 1957, and the people finally broke out of the chains they were encased in.

I remember that I dozed off whilst listening to his story. His scratchy voice lulled me to sleep as I gazed at the plants growing all over his garden. Time had made my grandfather softer. He never raised his voice at me and he always handled me as if I was weaved from the finest glass threads. My grandparents may have raised my father and aunt with a firm hand, but my elder brother and I were showered with affection and adoration. It was something I was extremely grateful for.

Once I grew up and reached an age where I could comprehend things at a much higher level, I finally understood the significance of my grandfather's words. A child's mind is constantly developing. Children don't really stick to one train of thought for too long. Their little brains just keep on gearing up for something even more fascinating.

To my grandfather, who grew up with his liberty limited to only the things his small hands could hold, freedom was different. To him, freedom meant his future children being able to grow up in an environment sheltered from being subjected to cruelty at the hands of soldiers who exploited our soil. Freedom was keeping his daughter safe from being ripped away from him to be used as a toy for overseas soldiers.

Now, to the children of the 21st century, so many of our views on liberation are divergent from the people who had to agonize back then. To me, freedom is being

able to go on holiday for two months without homework. Freedom is being able to read as many books as I want without worrying about exams. Freedom is being able to walk to the store to buy ice cream for an afternoon snack.

I understand that my grandfather keeps his freedom as something precious to his heart. To Malaysia, freedom was not something that was given. It was something the people of the nation bled and shed tears to obtain. To the people of Malaysia, freedom is the streets of the country being free from the control of separate realms that put us in shackles. To the old men and women, freedom is finally being able to spread their wings after being caged for so long.